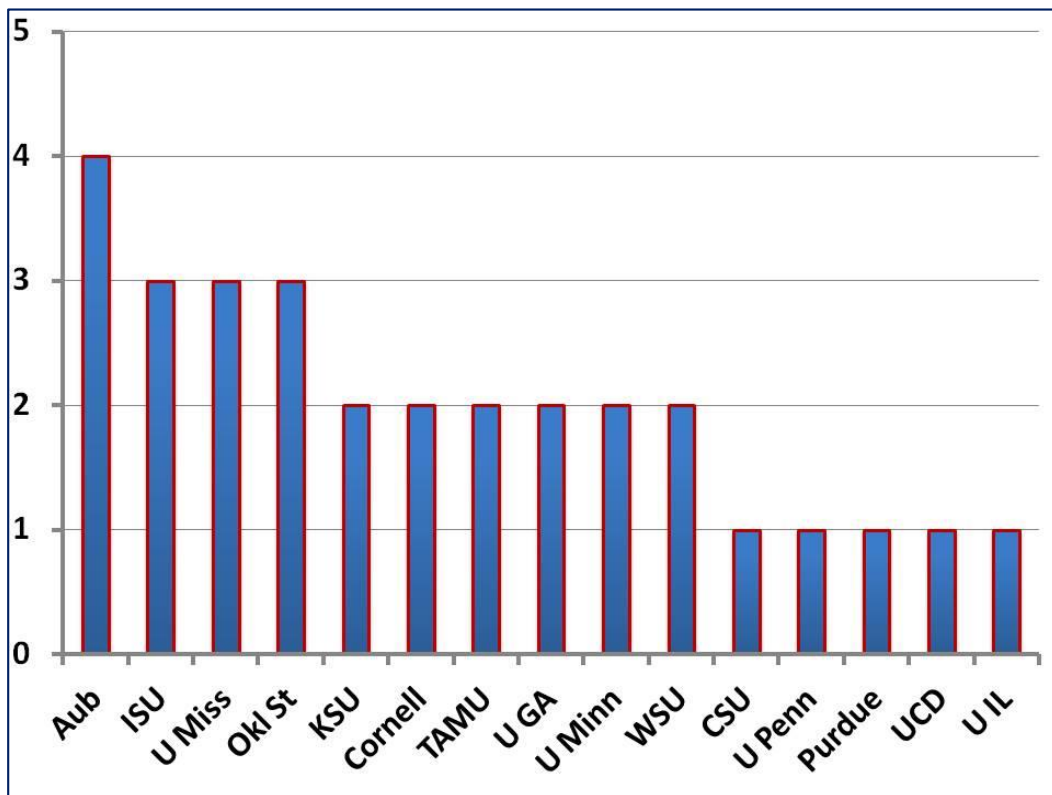


The Changing Face of AVMA Presidents Through the Years

By Dr. Donald F. Smith, with assistance from Dr. Leon H. Russell
May 21, 2013

When I leafed through the AVMA's 150th anniversary coffee table book tribute to the profession,¹ I was drawn to the profiles of the association's presidents and how they have changed from 1863 to the present. It occurred to me that the demographic shifts throughout our history should be more than of passing interest to the organization's members.

As we go to the annual conventions or read the biographies of the officers when they are installed each summer, we could imagine that the norm for the AVMA's president is a married white male and small animal practice owner.² He would have received his DVM from an established Midwestern or Southern veterinary college here in the United States.³



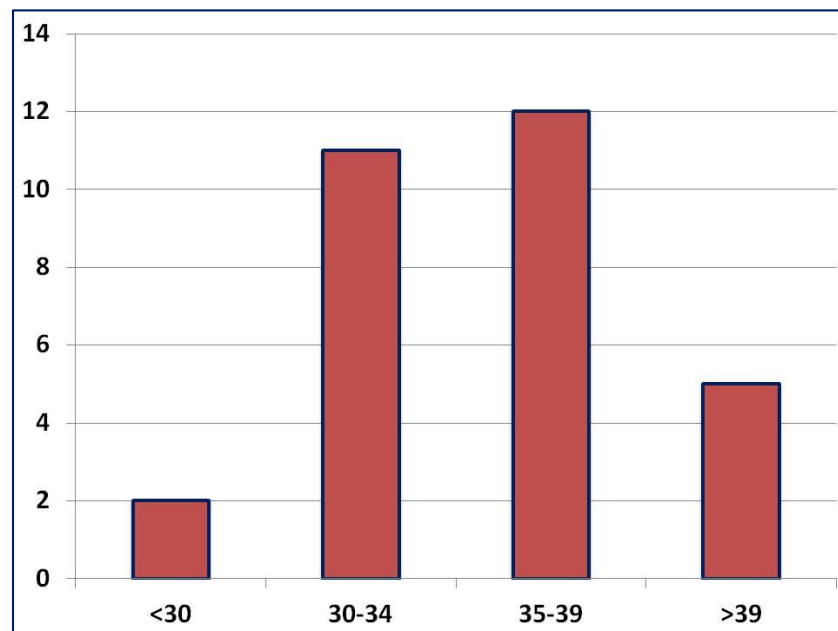
Colleges from which the last 30 AVMA presidents received their DVM.⁴

The typical AVMA president of the last 30 years would have been encouraged to become involved in a local or regional veterinary medical association within five years of graduation. He would have been elected to various state offices, perhaps serving as president.

Somewhere along the way, he would have become involved in the national association, perhaps on a council, committee or a task force, or as a member of the House of Delegates (HOD). Almost all of the recent presidents have been elected from their district to a coveted Executive Board (EB) seat where they spent up to six years learning the ins and outs of the national organization, including the political issues that surround ascending to the most visible veterinary office in the country. Many have served as chair of the Executive Board.

Presidents have come from all parts of the U.S. and at least two presidents since 1983 have arisen from each of the AVMA's eleven geographic districts. Size of the state does not seem to matter, because two presidents have come from among the least populated states in the country (Delaware and Rhode Island), and Nevada and Oklahoma have each had two presidents.

Though there is a broad age range of former incumbents, most were in their mid-fifties to mid-sixties, having been veterinarians for more than 30 years.



Number of AVMA presidents by years post DVM graduation.⁵

The Early Years (1863–1898):

The demographic profile of AVMA officers was very different 150 years ago. During the early years of organized veterinary medicine in the United States, the United States Veterinary Medical Association (USVMA) was centered in the Northeast and most of the meetings were held in New York City. Though the majority of the 19 presidents during that early USVMA period (1863-1898) were veterinarians who had graduated from European schools, physicians and self-educated animal healers were also elected president.

The most influential of the early presidents was Alexandre Liautard, a French physician and veterinarian who founded and led the American Veterinary College in New York City for 25 years. He served for two years during the 1870s and a third year in the 1880s. Daniel Salmon, who served as the last president before the AVMA was established and the meetings moved to Chicago, was the only USVMA president to have graduated from a U.S. college now in existence (Cornell).

The Middle Years (1898–1963):

Between the formation of the AVMA in 1898 and the association's centennial celebration 50 years ago, the presidents represented a relatively diverse demographic cross section of veterinarians. Though a few were still graduates of British colleges, the majority had been educated in the US or Canada. A substantial number of the US-educated veterinarians were graduates of the proprietary schools that had all closed by the mid-1920s.

Many of the presidents during this 65-year period were practicing veterinarians, including renowned early small animal veterinarians like Joseph Flynn (1935-36), C.P. Zepp Sr. (1949-50), and Mark Morris Sr. (1961-62). Others were directors of the Bureau of Animal Industry or veterinarians in the Army Veterinary Corps. Brigadier General Wayne Otho Kester (1956-57) was even on active duty during his presidency.

During this 65-year period, a multitude of distinguished academicians were presidents including three deans from Cornell, two each from Ohio State and Iowa State universities, and one each from the University of Pennsylvania, Kansas State University, Auburn University and the now defunct Kansas City Veterinary College.⁶

The Modern AVMA President (1963-2013):

During the later decades of the 20th century, the presidential profile continued to include a broad cross section of men from academia, public health, and practice. As it had been since the organization's inception, the office of the president included some of the leading veterinarians of their day. A notable example was biomedical scientist Harry Gorman (1976-77), who designed the first artificial hip joint in dogs, a device that was later adapted for human use. As head of the Air Force's Veterinary Corps, Gorman raised and trained the nation's first animals in space at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio.⁷

Kentucky equine surgeon Delano Proctor (1985-86) and small animal practitioner William Jackson (1979-80) were among the first practicing veterinarians to successfully pass certifying

examinations in surgery and ophthalmology. New York State veterinary practitioner, Dr. Stanley Aldrich (1980-81), was elected to the National Academy of Practices.

Compared to the broad and diverse career profiles of presidents in the first 120 years of the veterinary profession, most of the presidents of the past 30 years have arisen from practice, in particular, small animal practice.⁸ With the majority of veterinarians involved in clinical practice, and with other specialty- and discipline-based organizations within the profession providing support for areas outside of clinical practice, it should not be surprising that the trend is strongly in favor of private practice as the reservoir for current and future officer candidates.

Dr. Bruce Little, who served as Assistant Executive Vice President and Executive Vice President of the AVMA for over 23 years, explains it this way *“Politics is local, and because members of the House of Delegates who elect the president-elect (and therefore, the president) mostly come from the practicing community, it should not be surprising that they would be comfortable electing a practitioner to these positions.”*⁹



*Bonnie V. Beaver, DVM, MS, Dipl ACVB, Dipl ACAW
AVMA President 2004-05*

*Dr. Beaver is the second of three women to have served as
President of the American Veterinary Medical Association.
(Photo provided by the AVMA)*

Dr. Bonnie Beaver (2004-05) feels that *“practitioners tend to have a stronger reliance on the AVMA than academicians.”*¹⁰ She also speaks highly of the HOD, indicating that its members have been *“more sensitive in recent years to what the candidate for [the high] office would*

bring to the position.” Dr. Beaver, both a clinical veterinarian and a faculty member at Texas A&M, points to the fact that many academic veterinarians may not be as interested in AVMA leadership as they are assuming positions of leadership in their respective clinical or academic discipline.

Dr. Beaver looks at leadership from a broader perspective than the presidency, however.

“The AVMA benefits from having veterinarians from a variety of backgrounds among its councils, committees, and the Executive Board, and from representation of the various segments of the profession such as the military, federal government, public health, industry and academia, as well as clinical practice.”

Dr. Jan Krehbeil, the 2012-13 chair of the Executive Board and an academician who served as associate dean at Michigan State University, is testament to that diversity.

Acknowledgement: The author thanks Dr. Leon H. Russell (Texas A&M University), AVMA president 1993-94, for his assistance.¹¹

¹ The AVMA: 150 years of Education, Science & Service. American Veterinary Medical Association, Schaumburg, IL, 2012.

² There have been three women presidents (1996-97, 2004-05 and 2011-12).

³ No president has graduated from a veterinary college that was established after 1960.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ An additional two veterinary college deans were president before 1898.

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/28/obituaries/harry-gorman-72-space-animal-trainer.html>.

⁸ Gerald Johnson (1991-92) came from industry and John Freeman (1997-98) worked in the Public Health arena. Only two, Leon Russell (1993-94) and Bonnie Beaver (2004-05), came from academia, and it has been 65 years since a veterinary college dean served as president (William Arthur Hagan, 1947-48).

⁹ Little, Bruce DVM, Executive Vice President of the AVMA 1996-2007). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013 May 16.

¹⁰ Beaver, Bonnie, DVM, PhD, Professor, Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine and former president of the AVMA (2004-05). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013 May 15.

¹¹ Russell, Leon H., DVM, MPVM, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine and former president of the AVMA (1993-94). Telephone conversation with Donald F. Smith (Cornell University) 2013 May 15.

KEYWORDS:

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Bonnie V. Beaver
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Bruce W. Little
Jan Krehbeil
Harry A. Gorman
Daniel Salmon
Alexandre Liautard
Mark L. Morris Sr
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.

The author thanks **Dr. Leon Russell**, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine and former president of the AVMA (1993-94) for his assistance.